



**Dr. Kase Lawal's Commencement Address to the
University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering Fall Class
Friday, December 15, 2006**

Good afternoon to the members of the board of regents, President Jay Gogue, Dean Raymond Flumerfelt, faculty members, distinguished guests, parents, and engineering graduates.

It is good to be back on the campus of the University of Houston. I have enjoyed a long and productive relationship with Dean Flumerfelt and can count many good friends among the faculty here at the Cullen College of Engineering.

Thank you for extending an invitation for me to speak to the Fall 2006 class. Congratulations to the graduates, to the family and to the extended family members whose love and support helped guide you through your studies.

When we endowed the Petroleum Engineering Endowment Fund in 1992, the first and only university we considered for this gift was the Cullen College of Engineering. One of our top priorities at CAMAC is to invest in the communities where we operate and live. Today, we are fulfilling that commitment to community service by providing an avenue for academic enrichment and human development and partnering in the growth of citizens and communities worldwide. Hundreds of students, including many of those from my country of origin, Nigeria, have matriculated through the engineering programs here. They are now engineers and are making valuable contributions to the industry.

I always tell people in my travels around the world about Houston and the opportunities that exist here. This university is an academic jewel whose focus is to train the next generation of engineering and business leaders. In fact, when the new engineering complex facility comes on line in several years, the training that an engineering graduate will receive will surpass other national college curriculums. By offering a first class education, these students will not only succeed but will remain competitive in an increasingly interconnected and technological world.

Engineering graduates are hitting the job market at the very best possible moment ever due to the extreme labor shortage of engineers of every stripe. Indeed, the shortage of professionally trained petroleum engineers is especially acute and may have an impact on the industry both within the United States and globally. The current workforce, which averages at just over 55 years, is anticipated to retire before 2012, and without suitable replacements. The educators here and other universities around the nation recognize that

the crux of the problem is making the engineering profession attractive to high school students and encouraging them to pursue science and math curriculums.

I know that your studies here at the University of Houston prepared each of you for successful careers. As the chief executive officer of CAMAC International Corporation, an international energy company based in Houston, I work with some of the best and the brightest professionals in the energy and financial services industries around the world.

Aside from my traveling for work, I also, on occasion, have the opportunity to speak to students and young people who are early in their careers. I am always grateful for these exchanges because of the fresh perspectives they bring. Perhaps because of your age and exuberance for life it encourages others of us who have been working for awhile to stop and to reflect on who we are, where we have been, and how we got there. Please indulge me for a moment while I offer you the benefit of my experience.

Graduates, develop a thick skin now and be prepared for people to tell you that you are not qualified for the job, no matter how much education and experience that you may have or think you may have. CAMAC was turned down 19 times over a span of 2 ½ years before one person, Dino Nicandros, the former president and chief executive officer of Conoco, literally took a chance on a little, no-named, independently owned company that wanted, of all things, to explore for oil and obtain oil leases in offshore Nigeria.

Did I mention that CAMAC did not have one cent – and certainly we did not have the established credit lines needed to garner millions and millions of dollars to join the capital-intensive oil industry? Truly, all we had was a deep abiding faith in ourselves and a skill set that included an extensive knowledge of the oil industry in general and the West African oil industry in particular.

God blessed us to prevail and to meet the challenges the future required. At CAMAC, we parlayed our experience of trading agricultural commodities into trading crude oil in less than five years. We learned from our business experiences – our successes and our failures - and during the next 15 years of business branched into other areas while becoming one of the most solidly financed privately held African-American owned companies in the United States.

Learn to learn wherever you are. You may not like your first, second or third job. You may not even like the people that you work with. In fact, you may believe that they are complete and total idiots and they may well be. However, I encourage you to use it as an opportunity to improve yourself. How do you do that? Watch these people. Learn from their mistakes and then take care that you don't repeat them. Don't lose sight of the fact that the job that you have today will not be your job forever. You are there to learn and once having learned and mastered that lesson, whether it is a professional one or a personal one, reflect upon that experience, let it go and move on.

Speak to everyone. It is interesting to note what the impact of a simple hello and a smile will have on someone. Hebrews chapter 13 verse 2 says, “Do not be forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.” In business and particularly in Houston, where the seats of power are not as clearly defined as they are in older cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Boston, and London, you never really know who knows who and who may be in a position to help you along in your career.

Develop your own “Friends of Whomever” list. By speaking to everyone you may attract the future members of your own “kitchen cabinet” of mentors and allies. These are the people who will give you the straight talk about yourself and provide constructive criticism of your mistakes and the guidance you need to evaluate the next steps. They are also the people who can say to you without equivocation that you really messed that one up, now straighten up and let’s see if you can’t do that better the next time.

One of my first important business mentors was the late Reginald Lewis, whom I met through an old friend. Reggie was small in stature, but big in heart and I could count on him to give me solid, candid advice. More than any other person it was Reggie who encouraged me to evaluate my own personal skills and assets. He also steered me into the global economy; something that I hadn’t originally thought of when I was working as a young engineer for Shell Oil.

Be a conduit for change and progress no matter how simple or how elaborate. Author Ralph Ellison once said: “It takes a deep commitment to change and an even deeper commitment to grow.” Remember this as you begin new jobs where surprisingly people are resistant to change. If one is blessed to live awhile on this Earth, then you too will see the value that change brings. The fresh blossoms of spring yield to the constancy of the summer heat, while the changing leaves of autumn inevitably give way to the calm serenity of winter.

As you leave these academic halls, I encourage you to let your life be about more than just earning a paycheck or using a job to define you. Money and riches will come, but it’s the true man or woman who understands the value of a moment spent with a loved one, the beauty of a sun-kissed valley, or of a rust-colored sky at dusk. Let your life also be dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in whatever it is that you choose to do. Nothing is accomplished by hurriedly going through life missing out on what is good and true and real.

Philosopher, scholar, and activist W.E.B. Dubois in his vanguard book *The Souls of Black Folks* called for the development of the “talented tenth.” Dubois saw the talented tenth as a powerful, elite group of people focused on public service in America.

Graduates, I submit to you that what we need now is more than just a “talented tenth.” What we need today is a “talented generation.” This call must be inclusive of everyone because everyone **can and must** contribute.

I call on the “talented generation” to return to the spirit of commitment to excellence and to the community.

- the “talented generation” will realize that unless everyone is provided the same tools to succeed, then we as a society will fail.
- the “talented generation” will understand that the key to our humanity and to our interconnectedness is the knowledge that we are all human.
- the “talented generation” will reject the culture of sycophancy in public service and speak truth to power on a global stage.
- the “talented generation” will realize as the folk musicians *Sweet Honey in the Rock* sing that ***you are the ones*** that we have been waiting for.

It is this exchange in the marketplace of ideas at institutions like the University of Houston that allow students – the professionals of tomorrow - to reach a common ground and to build upon it. As engineers, you will perhaps work in the United States or in other countries building systems and infrastructure. Recognize and understand the importance that your leadership will play in those communities and actively use your skills to pursue an agenda of progressive empowerment.

In closing, thank you again to the administration and the University of Houston’s graduating class of 2006 for inviting me to present the commencement address. I wish you well on your journey into the world and I sincerely hope that all that you aspire to is fulfilled.

Graduates, remember that today marks the beginning of a new life with new challenges for you. Nurture all of your dreams, hold firm to all of your principles and remain committed to the concept of lifetime learning and the pursuit of excellence. If you reach out to others within the “talented generation” and recognize that you are a member of a global community, there’s no limit to what you will be able to accomplish.

In 1994, Nelson Mandela at his inauguration as the first African president of the Republic of South Africa quoted these words in his address. I would like to leave them with you today:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are

born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people the permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fears, our presence automatically liberates others.

Thank you University of Houston and God bless you!